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ABSTRACT

The technology of literacy for any given culture helps to Determine the character of its members. In less than 3,000 years, Western culture has been transformed from an oral/aural culture through many increasingly literate phases to a present stage which is approaching "computer literacy." Erich Fromm suggests that in the course of Western civilization, the trend has been one of increasing individuation and experienced individuality. He argues that as humans have gained more freedom, they have come to feel more lonely and alienated from each other than in cultures with less freedom, where people have greater feelings of security and belonging. The social upheavals of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation have enlarged people's freedom, leaving them with the conflict between individuality and security. Shifts in literacy technology, such as the discovery/invention of the transposable alphabet and the development of a practical method for casting movable type, form part of the underpinning of shifts in human consciousness. What, then, are the implications of the current pre-eminence of computers in modern society? What spiritual and philosophical views might be generated as a result of "computer literacy?" Because the lag time between literacy technology shift and cultural outcome appears to be decreasing, society may soon become aware of the cultural effects of the computer revolution. (MM)

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Individuality and Literacy: Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The present paper relates several shifts in cultural perceptions of individuality to corresponding transitions in literacy technology. Fromm's view of the shift toward individuality in the Renaissance and Reformation is related to Luther's use of the technology of printing with movable type invented by Gutenberg. An earlier transition point in humanity's experience of individuality is the development of the transposable alphabet by the ancient Greeks and a corresponding development of the notion of the "soul". The question is then raised as to the implications of the computer age for our further experience of our individuality.

Individuality and Literacy: Historical Perspective

The main thesis of the present paper is that the technology of literacy for any given culture helps to determine the character of the members of the culture. In less than three thousand years, Western culture has transformed from an oral/aural culture through many increasingly literate phases to a present stage when we are approaching "computer literacy". The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship of some major transitions in literacy technology and to relate them to the ways in which members of the culture experience themselves.

In Escape from Freedom, (1941) Erich Fromm offers a penetrating analysis of humankind's present predicament, suggesting that in the course of Western civilization, the trend has been one of increasing individuation and experienced individuality. He argues that as humans have gained more freedom, they have come to feel more lonely and alienated from each other than in cultures with less freedom, where people have greater feelings of security and belongingness, such as during the Middle Ages. The social upheavals of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation have enlarged people's freedom, leaving us with the conflict between individuality and security (Fromm, 1941; Schultz, 1986).

The literacy advance which appears to have helped to prepare the way for this shift was the development of a practical method for casting movable type, a discovery credited to Gutenberg and thought to have taken place between 1444 and 1456. While movable type had been known to the Chinese as early as the eleventh century it was not terribly useful because of the large number of Chinese characters. However in Europe, where the alphabet had a small number of transposable letters, the technology of printing with movable type was revolutionary (Dahl, 1968). "It has been said, with some

justification, that the invention of printing was the basis of the rapid triumph of the Reformation" (Dahl, 1968). It not only provided the means by which Luther could carry on his battle against the Church of Rome, it also stimulated interest in the spiritual life of the ordinary persons, which has led us to our highly individualistic philosophical stance. As Fromm has noted, the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation helped provide us with an experience of the freedom from which he believes we are trying so desperately to escape.

While the foregoing illustrates how a shift in the technology of literacy can make possible a shift in people's view of themselves, this kind of transitional process is not restricted to the Renaissance and Reformation but can also be noted in other cultural eras. Another illustration is the discovery by the ancient Greeks of the transposable alphabet and the resulting increase not only in human possibilities but in a sense of individuality in the experience of the members of the cultural group.

Classical scholars date the invention of a transposable alphabet by the ancient Greeks to some time between 750 and 700 BC (Havelock, 1963; Robb, 1971, 1978). Prior to that time representational systems were syllabaries such as the Linear B found at Mycenae, capable of indicating whole syllables but not separate sounds, thus capable of representing counts of good and creatures but not human thought or experience. In this context, information related to human affairs could not be represented in written language and had to be preserved in the oral memory. The Iliad (1951), the oldest extant writing in this tradition, represents oral poetry committed to the written form and thus is the best representation we have of pre-literate culture. The heroes of The Iliad are very much in tune with the values of

their cultural group and their gods and seem to have very little sense of "self" or individuality. These heroes are men of action, not reflection. Their actions are regulated by values taught through oral poetry, not conceptual thought (Havelock, 1963).

After the discovery/invention of the transposable alphabet, the view people took of themselves began to shift. Writers like Hesiod, who was the first to be able to compose in writing, as well as the lyric poets, the pre-Socratic philosophers and the tragedians all demonstrate steps in the transition from oral to literate culture (Snell, 1960). Tracing this development gives us signs of incipient existence of an observer, an incipient sense of individuality. This trend culminates toward the end of the fifth century BC when some few Greeks begin to talk as though they have a "soul" or psyche (Burnet, 1968). Havelock (1963) suggests that this separation of the knower from the known was a function of the availability of something written down upon which to reflect. In this sense, the sequelae of the invention of the alphabet by the ancient Greeks offer an earlier example of the process of cultural movement toward individuation as well as the basis for later transformations such as the Reformation.

If the thesis of this paper is accurate, that shifts in literacy technology form part of the underpinning of shifts in human consciousness, then what implications might the current pre-eminence of computers have for our consciousness? Since the introduction of computers after Word War II we have witnessed an explosion in the uses to which they can be put including vastly facilitated writing and printing (Augarten, 1984). What spiritual and philosophical views of ourselves might be generated as a result of "computer literacy"? Will it create an even greater sense of individuality

as each person sits before his/her own screen and thinks his/her own thoughts? One current theme is the growing interest in cognitive theories in all areas of psychology (Schultz, 1986) which may speak to our present view of individuality. While we are in the midst of another node in the evolution of literacy it may be difficult to predict emerging trends. However, the lag time between literacy technology shift and cultural outcome appears to be decreasing (three and a half centuries for the Greeks, less than one century for the Renaissance and Reformation) so that we may become aware of the cultural effects of the computer revolution sooner than we now expect.

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